



# Intraobserver and interobserver reliability of recategorized Neer classification in differentiating 2-part surgical neck fractures from multi-fragmented proximal humeral fractures in 116 patients



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**Background:** Optimal fracture classification should be simple and reproducible and should guide treatment. For proximal humeral fractures, the Neer classification is commonly used. However, intraobserver and interobserver reliability of the Neer classification has been shown to be poor. In clinical practice, it is essential to differentiate 2-part surgical neck fractures from multi-fragmented fractures. Thus, the aim of this study was to evaluate whether surgeons can differentiate 2-part surgical neck fractures from multi-fragmented fractures using plain radiographs and/or computed tomography (CT).

**Methods:** Three experienced upper limb specialists and trauma surgeons (B.O.S., A.P.L., and V.L.) independently reviewed and classified blinded plain radiographs and CT scans of 116 patients as showing 2-part surgical neck fractures or multi-fragmented fractures. Each imaging modality was reviewed and classified separately by each surgeon, after which each surgeon reviewed both modalities at the same time. This process was repeated by all surgeons after 24 weeks. Intraobserver and interobserver analyses were conducted using Cohen and Fleiss  $\kappa$  values, respectively.

**Results:** The  $\kappa$  coefficient for interobserver reliability showed substantial correlation (0.61-0.73) and was as follows: 0.73 for radiographs alone, 0.61 for CT scans alone, and 0.72 for radiographs and CT scans viewed together. After 24 weeks, the process was repeated and intraobserver reliability was calculated. The  $\kappa$  coefficient for intraobserver reliability showed substantial correlation (0.62-0.75) and was as follows: 0.62 for radiographs alone, 0.64 for CT scans alone, and 0.75 for radiographs and CT scans viewed together.

**Conclusion:** Clinicians were able to differentiate 2-part surgical neck fractures from multi-fragmented fractures based on plain radiographs reliably.

**Level of evidence:** Basic Science Study; Validation or Development of Classification System

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**Keywords:** Proximal humeral fracture; Neer classification; recategorized; interobserver; intraobserver; reliability

Proximal humeral fracture (PHF) is one of the most common fractures among elderly persons.<sup>18</sup> A Swedish population-based study was recently published that reported a national PHF incidence of 122 per 100,000 person-years in 2012, with the highest fracture incidence and surgical treatment rate observed in individuals aged 60 years or older.<sup>26</sup>

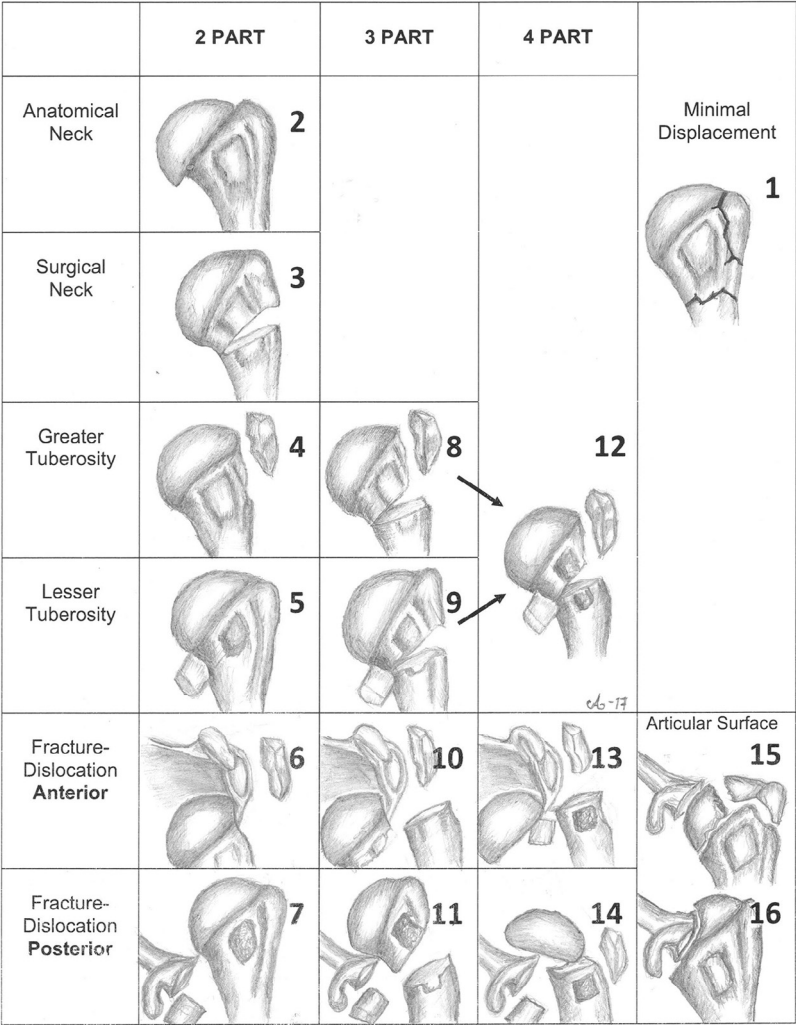
The optimal treatment for PHF has been controversial. This is especially true for the treatment of PHFs in patients older than 60 years. A recent Cochrane review, as well as a high-quality review from Finland, reported on current randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that have compared different treatment options for elderly patients with 3- or 4-part PHFs.<sup>9,15</sup> Both reviews suggested that the functional outcome after operative treatment is not superior to that after nonoperative treatment. In recent years, reverse total shoulder arthroplasty (RTSA) has gained popularity in the treatment of multi-fragmented PHFs, and 1 RCT stated its superiority over hemiarthroplasty.<sup>24</sup> It is interesting that no published RCT has compared the commonly used treatment options of plating and nonoperative treatment in 2-part surgical neck fractures that constitute the majority of displaced PHFs in the elderly population,<sup>5</sup> although 1 trial protocol has been published.<sup>16</sup> Case series have shown promising results after surgery with locking plates,<sup>10</sup> and the incidence of plating has increased significantly in many countries.<sup>12,26</sup> When the scientific evidence on these varying treatment options is taken into account, it seems that it is essential to differentiate 2-part surgical neck fractures from multi-fragmented fractures.

The Neer classification (NC)<sup>20</sup> is probably one of the most popularized and most used classification systems. However,

the 4-segment classification system defines PHFs by the number of displaced segments (humeral head and shaft, greater and lesser tuberosity), with additional categories for articular fractures and fracture-dislocations, making 16 different categories in total (Fig. 1). According to the original publication, a fracture is defined as displaced if there is more than 1 cm of distance between segments or 45° of angulation.<sup>20</sup> A limitation of the NC is the arbitrary definition of “displacement,”<sup>21</sup> the detrimental effect of which is amplified in 3- and 4-part fractures as to whether all fractured segments should be displaced according to the NC definition.<sup>2</sup> Intraobserver and interobserver studies of the NC are abundant, many of which have concluded fair to moderate agreement.<sup>3,19</sup>

Fracture classification systems should be easy to implement, and they should guide the decision-making process to select an adequate method of treatment based on high-quality evidence. On the basis of the current evidence, treatment recommendations for 2-part surgical neck and multi-fragmented fractures may vary, and thus it is essential to differentiate these categories. The NC with 16 categories seems too complicated in clinical practice, and according to a study by Court-Brown et al,<sup>5</sup> two-thirds of the displaced fractures fall into 3 categories: surgical neck (2-part) fracture and 3- and 4-part fractures.

With the limitations of the NC and recent scientific evidence on the treatment of PHFs being taken into account, the aim of this study was to assess the intraobserver and interobserver reliability of a simplified and recategorized NC in which we recategorized 3- and 4-part fractures into a single category of multi-fragmented fractures while otherwise retaining the original NC and its criteria. Radiographs and



**Figure 1** Neer classification for proximal humeral fractures. One of the authors (A.P.L.) created this illustration using the original Neer classification<sup>20</sup> as the data source. The proposed multi-fragmented fracture category includes original Neer classification categories 8, 9, and 12; otherwise, the original Neer classification was retained.

computed tomography (CT) scans were used to differentiate 2-part surgical neck and multi-fragmented PHFs. We hypothesized that trauma surgeons could differentiate 2-part surgical neck fractures from multi-fragmented fractures based on plain radiographs with substantial intraobserver and interobserver reliability using the recategorized NC.

Materials and methods

This prospective study sample included patients enrolled in the ongoing Nordic Innovative Trial to Evaluate Osteoporotic Fractures (NITEP) international multicenter RCT (n = 116). All patients recruited at Tampere University Hospital between February 1, 2011, and March 1, 2016, were included. As such, patient radiographs were readily available and easy to access for research purposes. The NITEP trial on PHFs compares nonsurgical and surgical treatment in the population aged 60 years or older, and more specific details on this trial have been published previously.<sup>16</sup> In accordance with the RCT protocol, all 116 PHFs were diagnosed using plain radiographs (anteroposterior and lateral views) taken on average 1 day (range,

0-3 days) after trauma, followed by a routine CT scan using the GE Lightspeed RT16 scanner (GE Healthcare, Buckinghamshire, UK), Philips Brilliance 64 scanner (Philips Medical Systems, Andover, MA, USA), or GE Revolution GSI scanner (GE Healthcare). The CT scan included the entire scapula and the upper third of the fractured humerus, with a slice thickness of 0.6 mm. Coronal, sagittal, and axial images were obtained, and 3-dimensional volume reformatting was performed.<sup>16</sup> The mean period between plain radiographs and CT scans was 1 day (range, 0-3 days). The Carestream Vue PACS (picture archiving and communication system) workstation (version 11.4.0.1253; Carestream Health, Rochester, NY, USA) was used to evaluate the radiographs and CT images; the raters were able to adjust the contrast and brightness and to zoom in and out on the images. According to the RCT recruitment consensus classification, this study included 53 multi-fragmented and 63 two-part surgical neck fractures. All radiographs included in this study will be available on the NITEP homepage ([NITEP.eu](http://NITEP.eu)) after June 2018.

The patients' radiographs and CT scans were rendered anonymous by removing names, identity numbers, and dates, as well as any other references. Three experienced upper extremity specialists and trauma surgeons (B.O.S., A.P.L., and V.L.), all of whom worked

at Tampere University Hospital, were selected as raters. They are perceived as experts in PHF management with a minimum of 5 years (range, 5-10 years) of experience in upper limb trauma and elective surgery including total shoulder arthroplasty and RTSA. Each rater independently reviewed and classified the plain radiographs and CT scans individually using our proposed simplified and recategorized NC in which we combined 3- and 4-part fractures into a single category of multi-fragmented fractures while otherwise retaining the original NC's displacement criteria (a fracture is defined as displaced if there is >1 cm of distance between segments or 45° of angulation). In the first stage, each rater independently reviewed the set of plain radiographic images and classified the fractures into 2-part surgical neck fractures and multi-fragmented fractures. In the second stage, the process was repeated using only CT scans. In the third stage, the raters reviewed and classified the fractures using all available imaging studies as in normal clinical practice (radiographic images and CT scans). On average, each set was reviewed within 3 days, and there was a 4-week delay before the next set was distributed for review. Before each viewing session, the radiographs were re-randomized and the raters re-blinded to their previous responses. The process was repeated by all 3 surgeons after a period of no less than 24 weeks to allow intraobserver reliability score calculation.

The reviewing process was conducted in the clinical setting; thus, the images were not calibrated, no time limit was set for viewing, and we did not hold a teaching session on the NC nor did we distribute a chart showing the NC. No additional instruments were used (eg, goniometer or ruler). NC fracture displacement criteria (1 cm or angulated at least 45°) were observed and judged pragmatically as in a normal clinical setting.

## Statistics

Interobserver and intraobserver reliabilities were calculated using Fleiss and Cohen  $\kappa$  statistics, respectively. Results were interpreted according to the Landis and Koch criteria<sup>14</sup> (0.00-0.20, slight agreement; 0.21-0.40, fair; 0.41-0.60, moderate; 0.61-0.80, substantial; and 0.81-1.00, almost perfect), and 95% confidence intervals were calculated. All analyses were completed using a web-based intercoder reliability calculator (<http://dfreelon.org/utlis/recalfront/recal>).

## Results

By use of the recategorized NC, the  $\kappa$  coefficient for interobserver reliability showed substantial correlation (0.61-0.73) and was as follows: 0.73 for radiographs alone, 0.61 for CT scans alone, and 0.72 for radiographs and CT scans viewed together. After 24 weeks, the process was repeated and intraobserver reliability was calculated. The  $\kappa$  coefficient for intraobserver reliability showed substantial correlation (0.62-0.75) and was as follows: 0.62 for radiographs alone, 0.64 for CT scans alone, and 0.75 for radiographs and CT scans viewed together.

## Discussion

The principal finding of this study was that experienced upper extremity orthopedic and trauma surgeons were able to differentiate 2-part surgical neck fractures from multi-fragmented

fractures based on plain radiographs with substantial intraobserver and interobserver reliability using the recategorized NC. In addition, CT scans did not markedly improve differentiation. The interobserver and intraobserver reliability of the NC in PHFs using radiographs has been shown in the literature to have great variation and is mostly graded as poor.<sup>7,19</sup> Therefore, the purpose of this study was not to validate the entire NC but was to show that the reliability of the recategorized NC that specifically focuses on differentiating 2-part surgical neck fractures from multi-fragmented fractures in elderly patients is substantial.

The justification for recategorizing the NC into 2-part surgical neck and multi-fragmented fractures is based on the literature and treatment recommendations. In 2-part surgical neck fractures, surgical treatment with locking plates and nonsurgical treatment have been commonly used, while in 3- and 4-part fractures, the treatment options suggested by the current evidence are RTSA and nonsurgical treatment. Indeed, most surgeons would not consider arthroplasty for the treatment of 2-part surgical neck fractures. Moreover, it has been stated that the most important fracture-related factor predicting increased surgical treatment of PHFs in elderly patients is the severity, that is, the fracture pattern.<sup>23</sup> It has also been previously shown that the poor intraobserver and interobserver reliability of the NC mainly arises from differentiating between multi-fragmented fractures. Majed et al<sup>19</sup> found that the poorest  $\kappa$  coefficient was recorded for 3-part fractures. Handoll et al<sup>8</sup> defined the fracture population of the Proximal Fracture of the Humerus: Evaluation by Randomization study using the NC. They noted an increase in interobserver agreement after lowering the criteria for assessing displacement to include "displaced but unclear if Neer displacement criteria met."

In concordance studies, the  $\kappa$  coefficient is used as an index of reliability. In this study, we used the categorization suggested by the Landis and Koch criteria<sup>14</sup> (0.00-0.20, slight agreement; 0.21-0.40, fair; 0.41-0.60, moderate; 0.61-0.80, substantial; and 0.81-1.00, almost perfect). We acknowledge that these values are not a gold-standard reference.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the  $\kappa$  coefficient is difficult to interpret unless the prevalence of positive and negative cases is taken into account. Therefore, the best way for the investigator to avoid paradoxical behavior of the  $\kappa$  coefficient is to design a study with approximately equal numbers of positive and negative cases.<sup>4,6,11</sup>

In the previous publication by our research group, we discovered that 68% of upper extremity surgeons in Nordic countries preferred CT scans for diagnostic purposes and 86% used them for preoperative planning.<sup>17</sup> In the present study, we found that CT scans did not improve the level of intraobserver or interobserver reliability in differentiating between the recategorized NC categories. These findings are in accordance with the previous literature.<sup>1,25</sup> CT scans have been shown to improve intrarater and inter-rater reproducibility in analyzing complex multi-fragmented fractures,<sup>22</sup> whereby CT obviously has its place in preoperative planning as it reveals the morphology of the fracture, guiding the surgeon during the operation.



We acknowledge that our study has limitations. One of the strengths of the study was that we used a defined prospectively collected cohort of PHFs in the population aged 60 years or older, where the method of collection resulted in a consistent homogeneous group. However, the predefined nature of the cohort may have biased the study results; the same surgeons (B.O.S., A.P.L., and V.L.) recruited the original 116 patients to the ongoing NITEP study on PHFs, as described in the “Materials and methods” section. The inclusion period was rather long, spanning a period of more than 5 years. However, the long inclusion period may have lessened the effect of our first limitation because the details of individual patients will have been forgotten over time.

## Conclusion

We introduced a recategorized NC by which experienced upper extremity specialists were able to differentiate 2-part surgical neck fractures from multi-fragmented fractures based on plain radiographs and/or CT scans reliably and in a reproducible manner. An interesting finding was that CT scans did not increase interobserver or intraobserver reliability. With the newly introduced recategorized NC, we expect to better guide PHF treatment policies and make them easier to implement and generalize into the clinical setting.

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